

THE TABLE BRIEFING: VOCATION, FAITH, AND CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

Darrell L. Bock and Mikel Del Rosario

IMAGINE WHAT IT TAKES FOR YOU to have a bowl of cereal in the morning. Imagine all the different vocations that go into making a box of cereal available for a reasonable price—from the farmer to those involved in the design and execution of the packaging process, the truck driver, and even the person who stocks the shelves at your local grocery store. Then imagine how many people are involved in providing easy access to the milk and sugar. While we rarely reflect on the multitudes of people and tasks involved in providing basic goods and services we use every day, considering these things can result in a profound appreciation for the wide array of vocations that support our culture and way of life.

On an episode of *The Table* called “The Relationship of Vocation, Faith, and Culture,” Steven Garber, founder and principal of the Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation, and Culture, sat down with Darrell Bock to discuss vocation and sharing common grace for the common good. In this Table Briefing, we define the terms “vocation,” “common grace,” and “common good” from a biblical perspective. How do the Scriptures show us God’s desire to use our vocations to bless our communities? What does it look like to approach work with a biblical view of vocation?

WHAT IS VOCATION?

While many in the church primarily view vocation as synonymous with one’s current employment context, vocation is a broader con-

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cept that encompasses more than our daily occupations. Vocation includes our call to love God with all of our hearts and minds in specific ways as we use our gifting and the opportunities he has given us. It is related to the imperative God nurtures within us to glorify him by the way we live. At bottom, it is a call to embrace a divine perspective on all of life—including the daily work that God has sovereignly directed us to do at our places of employment. Bock and Garber discuss this concept and make a distinction between the general and specific sense of vocation:

Garber: A vocation is a gift from God to us. Not surprisingly, the word has a history. It comes from a Latin root, *vocare*, a word for a call. So who's calling? Is there a caller? That's really the first of all the questions about vocation. Is there somebody giving a call? Is there a caller giving the call?

This is a conversation about God himself calling us to see the world as he sees the world, to hear the world as he hears the world, to feel the world as he feels the world, to care about the things that he cares about, to love the things that he loves. So that's really the deepest sense of vocation or calling: to see and to hear and to feel as God does.

Bock: So there's a directedness to vocation in which the sense is "I'm where I am because God has me here." At least that's a dimension of it. And that enhances the idea of "Well, I chose my job" or "I do my job in order to earn a living" or something like that. No, there is a—I'm going to coin a word here, a "placedness" to what we do, and God's responsible for placing us there.

Beyond a general sense of viewing the world and work through a biblical lens, there is a specific sense in which the term "vocation" is used to refer to actual occupations. In this way, multiple dimensions to the concept of vocation play out in specific ways for each person engaged in specific forms of work. On an individual level, one's calling to do a certain kind of work may remain constant amidst a changing context. Garber explains:

Garber: We have a tradition within the church which says there is a more general sense of vocation . . . but there's a more specific sense too. We can speak about the general sense of responding to the call of God upon my life—to know God, to be known by God, to love what God loves. But a more particular, specific sense is also legitimate, and we use this as the voca-

tion of cowboy, the vocation of law, the vocation of journalism, the vocation of medicine, the vocation of mothering. . . . [Vocation] has to address all of life, as my father helped me to see. . . . His vocation was multifaceted. At the heart of it was trying to love God and to love the things God loves, but it had a fatherly dimension to it. It had a husbandly [dimension]. It had a professional, scientist dimension to it. . . .

[There is a] general, deeper sense of vocation for all of us, the more particular vocation of being a rancher, being a businessman, being a teacher. [Called as a teacher, you] could teach in a grammar school for five or six years and then go on to get a master's degree and then a Ph.D. and then find yourself twenty years later teaching at a seminary. You know you're still the same person with the same calling to teach, but the occupational setting has changed over time. . . . You can find a deepening coherence with your vocation as your occupation unfolds over the course of life.

Sometimes, by God's grace to us, there's more overlap than at other times. Sometimes, because of systemic injustices and wrongs in the world and hurts and wounds in one's life, there's hardly any relation between what I end up doing day by day and what I really long to do with my life. But those always relate to each other in some honest way.

Indeed, a vocational calling is a calling to serve God in a vocational space; it transcends one's current job and can manifest in a number of specific employment contexts. More, it is a key part of discipleship to Jesus. As Greg Forster noted in a Table podcast series on economic wisdom:

[Vocation] is central to discipleship because work and the economy are so central to our lives that if that part of our lives remains secularized or unconverted, then Christianity . . . becomes a leisure-time activity, something that we do in our off hours, a few hours a week.

More and more, pastors and churches are recognizing that one way faith shapes culture is through the work people from all walks of life and religious backgrounds do during the work week. As Garber says, "Faith shapes vocation, which shapes culture for everyone everywhere." This is true regardless of whether a person is an atheist, Buddhist, Muslim, or Christian. Deeply held convictions shape the way one lives life. This realization has profound culture-making implications for the world as a whole. Therefore, recogniz-

ing that God has placed each person in a particular place of employment for a certain time, how should a Christian live out the general calling to honor God in the context of a specific workplace? Garber answers that the Christian should display “common grace for the common good.” But what is common grace? What is common good in the conversation on faith, vocation, and cultural engagement?

WHAT IS COMMON GRACE?

Graber notes, “It’s through our vocations that we are to take up this work of common grace for the common good.” That is, God calls us to share common grace for the common good through our professional work. Each week, we find ourselves rubbing shoulders with people like ourselves who live in a fallen world and have hurts and needs. How is the common grace that we are supposed to share with our coworkers, clients, and stakeholders distinct from saving grace? What does it look like to share common grace with our neighbors through our professions?

Garber: There’s a distinction between common grace and saving grace. Saving grace is God’s work . . . in the world. God saves; we don’t save. That is the confession of true Christian people. God is the savior, we don’t save.

Bock: We’re vessels.

Garber: Common grace is ordinary grace, to use another word. It is the ordinary gift of God to the world. . . . Common grace [is comparable to] the kisses of my good wife, which I love and adore and keep . . . but they don’t save me from my sin. But [often we incorrectly assume], if they’re not sacred in that sense they must be secular. If that’s the paradigm, then my wife’s kisses are secular kisses, sad to say, because of course they’re not saving kisses. Our paradigm is, “All of life is either . . . things God loves or things he doesn’t love as much. But [that can’t be] how we think about life. All of life is to be holy to the Lord. We have to have eyes to see.

Bock: So by common grace you really mean common grace; it’s appreciating the fact that everything is grace and a gift and special and from God and for our presence and enjoyment, that kind of thing, that life is designed to be lived out of an appreciation for all it is that God does. Even the very common things

that we go through in life are special because they are evidence of his provision.

Garber: That's the point really. And so a good law, a good road, a beautiful sunset, a good cup of tea in the morning, a good friend—these don't save us from our sin. But they're not nothing. They are gifts of God to us.

Common grace, then, includes ordinary acts of service that are a part of daily work. This relates to the broader understanding of vocation as God's mandate in Genesis 1:28 that shows humans have a responsibility to manage the creation. While "management" may initially seem to be a secular term, it carries profound theological implications for grace in daily work. That is, from serving a customer a cup of coffee or harvesting fruits that end up in grocery stores, to assembling a vehicle part that makes driving safer or enforcing laws that protect the intellectual property of artists, sharing common grace mirrors the love of God who graciously provides rain, oxygen, and breathtaking natural landscapes. While these things are not salvific, they nevertheless communicate an aspect of the heart of our gracious God.

How do the Scriptures demonstrate this? Bock and Garber consider what Christians can learn from the divine directive to those living as exiles in Babylon in Jeremiah 29:7:

Garber: One of the places I most love in the biblical story is where the prophet Jeremiah is speaking to the exiled people in Babylon: the Daniels, the Meshachs, the Shadrachs, Abednegos, and thousands more, really. And he's saying to them, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this word for exiled people: "Seek the flourishing of the city. Pray for the city to flourish. Plant trees, build houses, get married, have kids. And when the city flourishes, you will flourish; so pray for the city to flourish."

It would be easier in some ways to imagine praying for Colorado Springs than for Washington, DC. You know, thinking, "Well, [I don't want to pray] for Washington. There's too much bad [that] happens in Washington." [Jeremiah is talking about] the most iconically bad city in the world: Babylon. It's the worst of the cities.

Bock: And [the exiles would say], "They're our enemies."

Garber: But the word of Jeremiah given by God to the exiled

people is to pray for Babylon, for it to flourish, to seek its flourishing. There's a whole lot of common good in that calling that God gives to the exiled people—to seek the welfare. Another way to talk about it . . . [is] “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” That's not just privatized piety. [It] has personal meaning for all of us. But it has to be worked out in the whole of life to love my neighbor as I love myself. And we can connect [Jesus's teaching], I think, with honest integrity to that language of Jeremiah to the people who were exiled to Babylon: to seek the flourishing of your city, to care about your neighbors as you care about yourself, to love them as you love yourself.

[We should] work this out as Daniel did. . . . He was the chief political counselor to three tyrants. He weighed in on military strength, on agricultural resources, on building highways, on the economy. That's what political counselors always do. That was Daniel's work, as best we understand it.

A biblical view of vocation, therefore, allows us to see ourselves as agents of God in the world, helping our cities and neighborhoods flourish through our daily work. But this concept also points us beyond ourselves and helps us appreciate the contributions of others that allow society to function. Further, understanding vocation allows us to better relate to the people around us and appreciate how all kinds of work are expressions of service, love, and care for our neighbors. Moreover, these things demonstrate the value of the common good. How can we think about working for the common good more specifically in our professions?

WHAT IS THE COMMON GOOD?

In Matthew 5:13–16, Jesus teaches:

You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its flavor, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled on by people. You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. People do not light a lamp and put it under a basket but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so that they can see your good deeds and give honor to your Father in heaven (NET).

What does it look like to be salt and light in the world? How does this affect the way we conduct business and live among our neighbors? Consider how a concern for the common good can profoundly impact our vocation and cultural engagement:

Garber: One of my great teachers was John Stott. He said this in his commentaries and his teaching about the Gospel of Matthew. When Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world,” [Stott] said, “Why would you blame a room for being dark? Why wouldn’t you ask, Why wasn’t the light turned on? . . . His point was, Why would you blame the world for being in the world? Why wouldn’t you ask, Why wasn’t the church there? Why didn’t Christians get involved? Why didn’t we permeate the world?”

I work with the people who are behind the H-E-B grocery stores in Texas. . . . They’re committed to the Apostle’s Creed and to the Trinitarian faith and to being people of justice and mercy in the world and to working that out in selling milk and bread and bananas throughout the cities and villages of Texas. But I’ve watched them enough to know that they don’t suffer from dualism in their best thinking about this.

[Charles Butt and his family have] given generations to trying to think through “How do we serve Texas? By offering good food at a good price.” I know enough about them to know that they don’t see that as a secular [endeavor, where the attitude is], “We make enough money off Texans to do good things with charitable offerings at the end of the year.” They are very charitable. They are very generous people, really, but it isn’t because they have squeezed every ounce out of Texans and sold bad food at bad prices. Why do people keep going back? [It’s] because H-E-B has served Texas so well. They had a vision of common grace for the common good in and through their supplying of groceries to Texans.

Bock: What I’m hearing kind of between the lines in what you’re saying is this is not primarily about what we say, but it’s how we engage. . . . When we’re talking about being salt and light, we’re talking about the way in which we have contact and presence with people as opposed to merely talking to or about them.

Dallas Seminary graduate Hans Hess joined Bock and Garber at a cultural engagement chapel called “Applying Faith to Work” to explain how a deep concern for the common good motivated his entrepreneurial entry into the fast-food market, establishing Elevation Burger restaurants in Virginia:

Hess: I got this whitepaper that came across my desk that talked about the use of antibiotics in meat. . . . Widespread use

of antibiotics in the animal supply has caused superbugs to develop. . . . In the late '90s, ten thousand people a year were showing up at hospitals with a bacterial infection that was fairly common, but it had mutated in them to be resistant to antibiotics. So they would die because the antibiotics weren't effective. I thought, "This is awful! We have a food system that systematically kills people. This is terrible."

And this is when my Dallas [Theological Seminary] training came back—remembering Genesis, remembering that we have this obligation to care for the creation and each other. . . . Three years later, I had this idea: If you could make a burger restaurant that was using beef that was grass fed instead of grain fed. . . . I realized, in the marketplace, this was a complete hole. There was nowhere I could take the kids my wife and I were planning on having, where we would feel good serving them a convenient, quick meal like a hamburger . . . without serving them commodity beef.

I worked on the business plan for a couple of years and finally opened up the first [Elevation Burger restaurant] in Falls Church, Virginia, a couple of blocks from the church Steve [Garber] and I went to. So that's how I got into the burger business. It was public-health motivated, which was theologically motivated.

These examples illustrate the ethos behind Dallas Theological Seminary's slogan "Teach Truth. Love Well." The slogan represents a commitment to connect the mind and the heart, the intellect and emotions, so that the biblical worldview is understood and lived out as a holistic worldview, seamlessly encompassing all of life, including the specific vocations in which God has placed us now.

On the website for the Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation, and Culture, Garber shares a prayer that should inspire us to approach our daily work with common grace for the common good in mind:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, you declare your glory and show forth your handiwork in the heavens and in the earth: Deliver us in our various occupations from the service of self alone, that we may do the work you give us to do in truth and beauty and for the common good; for the sake of him who came among us as one who serves, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

CONCLUSION

The next time you have breakfast, consider the wide variety of people who collectively allow easy, affordable access to simple things like a box of cereal. Doing so invites reflection on our vocations—our shared calling to love God and others. How are we going to serve our Lord and others through our work today?

Vocation transcends our jobs and may look different in various contexts and seasons of life, yet it is a key part of our discipleship to Jesus. A biblical view of vocation, then, includes a holistic perspective of discipleship in which every day can be lived intentionally in God's presence, manifesting common grace for the common good in our daily work.

To view the complete series or download transcripts of “The Relationship of Vocation, Faith, and Culture” and other Table Podcasts on a variety of relevant theological, pastoral, and social topics, visit <http://www.dts.edu/thetable>.

Suggested podcasts:

- Politics, Economics, and the Common Good
- 12 Principles of Economic Wisdom
- The Moral Requirements of Flourishing Economies



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